Northwest Journal of Teacher Education

Volume 3
Issue 1 *Northwest Passage: Journal of Educational Practices*

Article 3

January 2004

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Recommended Citation

Georgeson, Tina; Gann, Cory; and Nourse, Steve (2004) "Effective Methods of Supervising Student Teachers in Special Education Environments," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2004.3.1.3

Effective Methods of Supervising Student Teachers In Special Education Environments

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ABSTRACT

Although cooperating teachers design and implement model programs of inclusion and special instruction, the supervision of student teachers requires an entirely other "trunk full of unique tools." Successfully facilitating the student teacher's development requires not only good modeling, but also meaningful feedback that is honest and constructive. Such mentoring holds the most promise when the intern receives maximum experience with the tenets of a constructivist teaching philosophy *and* the implementation of best instructional and management practices. *The cooperating teacher is ideally situated to interpret the contours of constructivist theory as it is manifested in daily classroom discourse and activity. Careful observation and "kid watching" give face and specificity to abstract tenets and bring the learning process into focus. Best practices depend on a systematic approach to instruction which takes into account six variables: structure, clarity, redundancy, enthusiasm, appropriate rate, and maximizing engagement. Engagement also relies on motivation which is a crucial factor in effective classroom management. The student teacher is required to participate in critical reflection about all of these variables under the watchful tutelage of the cooperating teacher and the university supervisor.*

INTRODUCTION

The true definitions of a "general education class" and a "special education environment" are hard to fully and correctly identify. The average urban class of 15-20 years ago looks very different today. Currently in urban or suburban settings in Washington State it is not unusual to find a class of 26 elementary school students or 30 or more secondary school students. In addition, the new student teacher may find in this same class mix, students whose instruction is directed by an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), students who have Section 504 plans, bilingual, English Language Learners (ELL), Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students, "at risk" students, and low income and transient students, some even living in cars or on the streets. Tukwila School District, south of Seattle, 15 years ago was the bedroom of Boeing and primarily a white-middle class neighborhood. As of 2003 Tukwila Elementary School had a population of students composed of 43% White, 16% African-American, 20% Asian-American, 20% Hispanic, and 1% Native-American. Of this population 18% qualified for special education

services, 21% were learning English as a second language, and 6% were considered highly-capable. As a marker for socioeconomic status, 61% of the students participated in a free or reduced lunch program designed to serve low-income families. This complex setting creates a substantial challenge for a student teacher.

This mix of students does not match well with one style of learning or a non-flexible system of educating children. Supervisors of student teachers need a trunk full of unique tools to help them effectively guide and supervise their charges. Not only is it imperative to have a variety of teaching methods ready to model, but the supervising teacher must be able to give meaningful feedback to the student teachers that is honest and constructive. Supervisors must be able to clearly define their role as well as that of the student teacher, set appropriate timelines for teacher-preparedness, teach the tenets of a constructivist teaching philosophy, provide clear-cut examples of best practices, and steer the student teacher away from common pitfalls that may tend to be discouraging. This article is designed to provide some effective strategies for accomplishing the awesome task of preparing new teachers for a diverse and ever-changing world of students.

It is our opinion, both as educational instructors and as representatives of Central Washington University, that the tenets of a constructivist educational philosophy best meet the needs of the student population described. Therefore our definition and understanding of a "constructivist" educational philosophy follows.

THE TENETS OF A CONSTRUCTIVIST TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Although many student teachers arrive at public school classrooms with a strong theoretical basis about constructivist philosophy, the tenets of this perspective on student learning are not always self-evident in classroom transactions. The cooperating teacher is ideally situated to be a mentor in recognizing how children construct knowledge, and how such understanding contributes to decisions about environment and pedagogy.

One of the most significant actions a teacher can model is to shine an observant beacon on children's thinking and student representations of learning. Constructivism derives from an assumption and belief that what children say and do is grounded in reason and logic, whether or not right answers are achieved and lessons are learned. Students in methods classes may have become adept at lesson planning and the taxonomy of teaching, but likely come to their school sites with limited experience staying attuned to the interface between lesson components and the individual child's mind. Teachers can chronicle children's thoughts and reactions, model "kid watching" during hands on work and individual task performance, and pose reflective questions such as""why did she say that?; What do you suppose he was thinking?; Where did that idea come from?" When teachers practice such reflections in collaboration with student teachers, they are helping establish a habit of mind which acknowledges that such queries come not from blank slates or empty vessels but from alert, young, and curious minds. Kid watching is a most vigorous and demanding activity and cooperating teachers can stretch preservice students' observational powers by regularly performing the following steps:

- Identify individual children you want specifically to observe that day. (This strategy develops focus in observing, and encourages new observers to watch for the details of student work that reveal how children are understanding and making sense of a task or a concept.)
- Look for grade level appropriate problem solving skills associated with an activity. (Almost anything a child tackles can be viewed as an effort at problem solving. Their mechanisms for proceeding unveil how they are constructing the problem by joining previous knowledge with new knowledge in pursuit of a solution.)
- Stress the constructivist side of "Aha!" moments in the course of the day. (Children make connections all the time. A child may get excited about

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/nwjte/vol3/iss1/3
DOI: 10.15760/nwjte.2004.3.1.3

noticing a pattern, not in the middle of the math lesson, but later in the day when the teacher is reading a story. Such connections are the stuff of the constructing mind.)

- Acknowledge times when a student has "broken the code" about a particular mega-skill.

In a recent conversation with a classroom mentor teacher of primary children, notes were compared about the strategies young children use to solve simple arithmetic computations. This veteran teacher commented about how varied the preferences were of individual class members in determining ways to solve a problem. Some chose to make jumps on a number line. Others immediately secured manipulatives from the math shelf. Many children consistently reverted to what Constance Kamii (1985) calls "pecking;" that is, the process of combining two sets together by counting all the way back from the first item through to the last. This approach is generally considered to be at a more juvenile stage than for example "counting on" in which the first quantity is held in mind to be added on to with the second quantity. Whether taught or not, children arrive at this counting on strategy on their own, after repeatedly pecking their way through all the numbers beginning at one, and experiencing the internal motivation to figure out a more efficient way. Such "arriving" is the essence of constructivism. An experienced master teacher can often almost intuit when a child will make this connection, and by taking a moment to notice out loud this transitional mental leap, a face is put to the tenets of an abstract theory.

Student teachers take away from theory and methods classes an appreciation for the central place which "hands on" experiences hold as emblematic of constructivism. In a way, hands on and manipulative-based learning have become iconic images for the constructivist take on acquiring knowledge. But merely employing hands on materials does not in and of itself create a constructivist environment. It is when students are provided the opportunity to explore the dimensions of material, and to test hypotheses in a process towards the invention (or perhaps reinvention) of ideas and knowledge, this is the moment at which constructivism is made visible. Cooperating teachers are uniquely in a position to point out such hypothesis testing at the instant of formulation, and in so doing provide the "Aha!" experiences upon which student teachers construct an understanding of this theory which is more profound than it had been before.

IMPLEMENTATION OF BEST PRACTICES

With the climate of accountability that has accompanied standards based instruction, it is critical for pre-service teachers to transfer the theory and methods taught in university urses to the cssroom. In order for them to be prepared for their field experiences this transfer of skills needs the guidauce and support of their cooperating teacher and university supervisor. Candidates for student teaching need to be well versed in best practices in the areas of instruction and classroom management. The job market is competitive and the preparation of pre-service teachers in delivering quality lessons that are assessment driven is crucial to their future employment. The area of classroom management is another area that needs specific practice so that the student teacher can establish/maintain a positive classroom environment that allows their students to learn the concepts being taught.

INSTRUCTION

There are several ways to evaluate a student teacher's performance during an observation. These assessment techniques provide student teachers/interns with specific feedback about their teaching skills. Videotape lessons for self, supervisor, and/or peer review is an excellent way to objectively evaluate an intern's teaching style. Anderson (1998) identified field notes, checklists, anecdotal accounts, and dialogue journals as methods to provide specialized feedback. Assistance plans are another tool to help a student teacher who may find herself in overwhelming situations. Originally, assistance plans were designed for certificated teachers who were

not being successful in the classroom. With minor adjustments the components of the plans would also help a struggling intern. The components of assistance plans include:

Defining the problem in terms that are key to a variety of situations.

Stating objectives in behavioral terms so that the student teacher can have a definable path to success.

Outlining intervention strategies that are specific and attainable.

Proposing a realistic timeline.

Setting specific procedures for collecting data to denote a change in the intern's instructional competence (Tucker, 2001).

Systematic teaching outlined by Mastropieri and Scruggs (2000) addresses some problem areas in which novice teachers commonly engage. The application of systematic teaching is an organized and specific way to approach instruction in today's classrooms. Helping the student teacher understand and implement the six variables in systematic teaching, known as the SCREAM variables, is the goal of their student teaching experience. Each letter stands for an aspect of effective teaching leading to best practices in the area of instruction of students. The six areas of emphasis are:

Structure
Clarity
Redundancy
Enthusiasm
Appropriate Rate
Maximized Engagement.

All of the variables are interdependent on each other and no one is more important or vital than another.

Structure, "means that lessons are well-organized and systematic, and that students are aware of the organization, and the purpose of the lesson" (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000, p. 30). There are curricular materials that are scripted and sequenced which give the teacher a complete lesson plan and delivery system. Because of this internal structure, student teachers tend to fall into the trap that the objective of the lesson is to "get through" the outlined material in the allotted time. Failure to see the bigger picture, how each lesson is complimentary to lessons that have preceded it and lessons that will follow, leaves students with fragmented teaching of key concepts. It is the supervisor's duty to assist the intern in seeing beyond the immediate lesson and help them fashion their lessons as cohesive parts of the larger whole. For example, as part of their formal lesson planning students are required to give a rationale for how the lesson of yesterday, today and tomorrow all fit together. In doing so, the student teacher will realize that skills build upon each other, that skills can cross curricular lines, and that skill development is not a "one shot" affair because learners need time to practice skills before they are mastered.

When teachers enunciate clearly, teach directly to the lesson's objective, and use concrete examples, they have exhibited Clarity (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000). Speaking in a pleasing tone that modulates will be helpful as the student teacher delivers instruction. Finding their "teacher voice" is a goal for student teachers in the field. The ability to deliver instruction naturally, without having to search for words as they are explaining a concept to their students is evidence that their "teacher voice" is developing. Understanding the learning styles and learning differences among the students will help the student teacher in this process. Knowing that students, especially younger students, learn best through example and integrating those examples in natural ways within the lesson is key to clarity.

The reinforcement of the critical concepts, facts, and/or terminology of the lesson are critical for learning to take place. Redundancy, the repetition of key words and phrases will assist students in mastering the specified objective (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000). Students need to hear the key concept of the lesson over and over again in order for them to practice the skill correctly and then to transfer that knowledge to a new situation. The supervisor's role is to assist the student teacher in identifying the key concept and develop strategies that provide the redundancy needed for learning. It is not a matter of repeating the key word or phrase randomly but repetition with purpose in natural ways.

A high level of Enthusiasm is a vital aspect

of delivering instruction to all students, especially those that have a history of academic failure or who are not motivated to succeed in school (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000). The job of teachers is to "help students become competent and interested" (Wesley, 1998, p. 80). Sometimes scripted curricular materials deaden enthusiasm but it is in the best interest of students that these types of lessons, perhaps more than others, be delivered with the utmost energy. If the student teacher appears bored with the lesson, the students will also become bored and disinterested. The student teacher needs to approach each lesson with all the enthusiasm they can muster, as if it vital to survival.

Appropriate rate "is neither too fast nor too slow. Generally, a brisk rate of presentation is compatible with enthusiasm variables and helps keep lessons interesting and motivating" (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000, p. 30). This variable is challenging to teach directly. It is a matter of trial and error before a student teacher can find a pace that works with a particular group of students. Subtle changes in weather, schedule adjustments, and even impending vacations can alter the students' response to instructiou. The student teacher must find the pace that works for that particular day, to think on their feet, to monitor and adjust their lesson plans, and to be as flexible as possible to maintain a pace that is conducive to learning. This skill tends to be intuitive in nature and will develop over time. A difference among student teachers is the amount of time needed for various skill development with purposeful practice, but the question remains, is it congruent with the finite time a student teacher has in their field experience?

The last variable, Maximizing engagement, is important to mastery of a concept. The more students are engaged in the learning task the more they will retain and transfer those skills to a new task (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000). This variable is a combination of all previous variables. If the lesson has quality structure, is clear, contains repetition of key concepts, and is delivered with euthusiasm and at the appropriate rate, the students will be engaged iu the activity. It is the job of the supervisor to provide an atmosphere that is safe to make mistakes, to think critically about those mistakes, and to make changes in the delivery of instruction to remedy those mistakes (Genor, 2000).

Critical self-reflection about performance is crucial for a student teacher to strengthen teaching skills. It is essential to have time when supervisor and student teacher can sit down and review the observed lesson, outlining those variables that were done well and those variables that are in need of change, in order to maximize student engagement. Such reflection can often be a pivotal point in the awareness of the student teacher. The process of analyzing one's own performance can be intimidating. It is the role of the supervisor to be cognizant of the student teacher's thinking, help hone her or his skills of self-reflection, to provide insights into the instructional process, and to scaffold assistance in making changes in instructional delivery.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Engaged and interested students are less likely to exhibit behavior problems. How can teachers keep students interested in a given activity? Sprick, Garrison and Howard (1998) developed an equation that addresses this concern. The equation reads EV=M, expectancy of success times the value of completion equals motivation. If students are put into a situation that challenges them and the students have a high expectancy of success and value their learning of a skill, then they will be highly motivated during the activity. When students are highly motivated they will be engaged in the activity leaving no time to misbehave. It is the job of the studeut teacher to design activities that are not only relevant to the needs of the students but are equally motivating to them. Student teachers must embrace this concept in order to engage in best practices in the area of classroom management. Ultimately, the goal of any instructional session is that management doesn't interfere with the flow of the lesson, and therefore students will be engaged in the lesson during the allotted time.

Equally important to classroom management are the little things that occur throughout the day. For example, the simple act of greeting students

by name at the door at the beginning of the morning can set a positive tone for the rest of day. Having a 3:1 ratio of positive vs. negative interactions in the course of a morning and afternoon will also enhance the positive flavor of the classroom (Wong & Wong, 1998). In the event misbehaviors do occur, a teacher's response needs to be seen as a redirection rather than a reprimand and allows the students to channel their energies in a more constructive way. The ability to gain attention is somewhat easy (Sprick, et al, 1998; Wong & Wong, 1998; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000), however, the ability to maintain attention can be elusive for the student teacher. The supervisor's role is to offer strategies and tips that the student teacher can implement readily during their next lesson, which results in more engaged students and more effective teaching.

When quality instruction and management are both in place, the student teacher's experience will be a positive. It becomes a time to hone instructional skills, to develop management skills, and to enjoy working with children and youth in the classroom. This positive practice will transfer easily to their first teaching job and will continue to enhance their careers as teachers. Combining the tenets of "constructivism" and the best practices described previously can prepare successful new teachers and meet the unique needs of a diverse student body.

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DOI: 10.15760/nwjte.2004.3.1.3